

**STATEMENT OF MARK BERKLAND
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**
**Before the
HOUSE AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT
OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today and provide an update on the forestry-related activities of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

My name is Mark Berkland, and I am the Director of NRCS Conservation Operations. I have served in the past as NRCS State Conservationist in South Carolina and in many capacities at the field level with the agency. In my experiences here and in the field, I have found excellent opportunities for forestry on private agricultural lands. Across the nation, farmers and ranchers are exploring forestry practices as ways to improve productivity, sustainability, and to achieve diversified sources of income for their operation. Often these practices include windbreaks, shelterbelts, alley cropping, and silvopastures to name a few. As farmers and ranchers come to NRCS for assistance, forestry practices often prove not only to be sound science, but good common sense conservation.

As you know, landowners across America are faced with ever-increasing pressures to maintain productive and profitable businesses. Landowners owning private forestlands provide our Nation with a variety of products. The demand for sawtimber, plywood logs, and quality hardwood logs continues to be strong. To meet the demand for these products, our existing forests must be managed to provide a flow of products now and into the future. Owners of private forests are willing to accept the normal risks associated with managing a forest tract over very long periods between income that often occur only once in a person's lifetime. However, they are largely unaware of the benefits gained by receiving technical assistance that can increase economic returns and enhance resources.

The public benefits from these private lands are great. Benefits include protecting watersheds, providing habitat for wildlife, modifying climate change by sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, and producing many other products we demand and enjoy such as maple syrup, mushrooms, and medicinal products. In addition, the revenue the owners pay in taxes support local governments and schools. These shared values have led to the development of Federal and State public forest programs that through a voluntary incentives approach encourage private landowners to retain and manage these lands.

We know that forestland owners want to be good stewards of the land. They know that stewardship is in the best interests of long-term productivity of their operation and want to leave improved natural resources and a better environment for future generations. Often, technical assistance is needed to help implement those goals. Our mission is to help private landowners meet the challenge of sustaining their natural resources while maintaining a productive and profitable business.

Today, I would like to highlight the many ways some of our conservation programs are making a difference around the countryside.

Landowners are using conservation to improve the productivity and sustainability of their forests, while also improving the asset value of their forest. Our programs are voluntary. In response to new environmental regulations at many levels, we are helping landowners meet some of the regulatory pressures they face. In turn conservation programs provide public benefits that go well beyond the edge of the forest. Mr. Chairman, I believe that conservation programs the Congress included in the 1996 Act, when coupled with our historic conservation programs, and the state and local delivery system are proven winners for the landowner, and the country as a whole.

Conservation Technical Assistance

The cornerstones of our agricultural conservation activities are the NRCS workforce and our partnerships. Everything we accomplish in this area is contingent upon the talents and technical skills of our field staff around the country. They are trained professionals with the technical tools, standards and specifications to get the job done. NRCS has operated since its creation through voluntary cooperative partnerships with individuals, conservation districts, state and local governments, which include state forestry agencies, and other Federal agencies and officials. That partnership may be even more important today if we are to meet the challenging conservation problems facing our Nation's landowners.

For more than 60 years, the NRCS has used conservation technical assistance to build a foundation of trust with people who voluntarily conserve their natural resources. Each year, the NRCS provides information, education, planning, and/or implementation assistance to more than 1 million land users. On average, the Agency's conservation assistance leverages more than \$1 in contributions for every Federal dollar invested.

The demand for technical assistance to install agroforestry practices – the intentional blending of agricultural and forestry production for economic and conservation benefits – has grown greatly. In addition to the practices mentioned at the beginning of my statement, forest riparian buffer strips, living snow fences, forest farming, and special applications such as treating wastewater are excellent agroforestry examples. The use of these practices will continue to increase as the ownership of forestland continues to be fragmented as well as to help address the wildland-urban interface. Agroforestry practices can be used to provide visual and noise screens, odor disbursement, lowering of forest fuels surrounding communities, as well as provide important additional and diversified income to landowners.

NRCS accomplishes its goals by working with 3,000 local Conservation Districts that have been established by state law and with American Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Governments. We also leverage our resources with the help of more than 348 Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils. RC&D Councils are among the leaders in fostering new technology to local forest industries, helping existing forest industries demonstrate new forest products that help to save local governments significant funds while retaining more jobs in their communities, and providing landowners technical information to manage forests.

Forestry Incentives Program (FIP)

To increase timber production, FIP was authorized by Congress in 1978 to share the costs of tree planting, timber stand improvement, and other related practices on nonindustrialized private forest lands. The Federal share of these costs ranges up to 65 percent.

FIP is designed to share the expense with eligible, private landowners to produce timber. For the life of the practices, additional environmental benefits accrue including wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration.

Funding for FIP for FY 2001 is \$6,325,000. With these funds 4,049 participants were enrolled with forest management plans on 151,015 acres of private forestland. Of this total, 117,026 acres of trees were planted, 23,709 acres of timber stand improvements were accomplished, and 10,230 acres of site preparation for natural regeneration was implemented. We would estimate that since 1975, landowners have established nearly 4 million acres of tree planting and 1.5 million acres of timber stand improvement through FIP. We cannot say, however, how many of those participants would have planted these trees without FIP assistance. The program targets funds to those landowners who are most likely to plant trees.

The Administration did not request funding for this program in the FY 2002 Budget. FY 2001 funding was provided in the context of emergency assistance. The Administration does not consider additional funding for the FIP to be a high priority, with additional funding more appropriately targeted to higher priority conservation purposes.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, as exemplified through the many conservation programs and activities we have underway, there is a great deal happening on the ground. The public benefits are an improved quality of life, affordable and safe food supply, clean air and water, reduced damages from floods and other natural disasters, abundant fish and wildlife, scenic landscapes, and a sustainable resource base. We are proud of our accomplishments and look forward to working with you to build on all that we have done thus far. This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman, and thank you again for the opportunity to appear. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.